

12-31-2007

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Recommended Citation

Mahgoub, Nahla and Morsi, Reham (2007) "Youth Perspectives on Citizenship and Civic Engagement in Egypt," *The Undergraduate Research Journal*: Vol. 3 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://fount.aucegypt.edu/urje/vol3/iss1/5>

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Youth Perspectives on Citizenship and Civic Engagement in Egypt

Nahla Mahgoub
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Abstract: During the past two decades, Egypt has witnessed an enormous change in the way political affairs are handled. For this reason, concepts of citizenship and nationality have changed in the minds of all peoples, creating a need to come up with specific definitions of citizenship that provides a clear framework in which the government and its people can interact. Egypt has a special demographic distribution of the youth bulge-where the youth make up the majority of the population. For this reason it is important to assess how this youth bulge perceives the concepts of citizenship, nationality and civic engagement. This research is conducted to assess the actual political participation of youth as a form of civic engagement and to estimate how much of the Egyptian youth today has a "sense of community" and thus how much have the potential to participate if directed to the right track. The field work that was conducted to assess the youth bulge was in The American University in Cairo where 100 surveys made up of 30 questions were distributed. The questions assessed issues of citizenship and civic involvement and the final part of the survey was assessed using the Chavis scale.

Introduction

As a result of globalization, Egypt is witnessing transformations on political, social and economic levels - a change which poses a number of new challenges for its people. With the increasing interconnectedness between countries, concepts of citizenship and nationality have changed in the minds of individuals, creating a need for every country to form its own definition of citizenship that fits the needs and idea of its population and that provides a clear framework in which the government and its people can interact. Home to a large 'Youth Bulge' or demography wherein youth comprise the majority of the population, Egypt's discussion of citizenship must take into account its younger and more populous citizens. The Youth Bulge places a great amount of responsibility on the shoulders of youth as the fraction of society that can make a real change towards the development of the nation, and as such, it is this segment's perceptions that need to be assessed when examining the concepts of citizenship, nationality and civic engagement.

Conducting research in the above areas is especially important considering the fact that very little work has been conducted in Egypt and the Middle East – unlike in the United States and Europe – on issues of youth and civic participation. Presented as preliminary research, this paper attempts to identify the meaning of citizenship among youth in Egypt and to highlight their perception of meaningful and active participation in civil society - whether in the political, economic or social spheres. Moreover, the research was conducted to assess the actual political participation of youth as a form of civic engagement, and attempts to estimate the percentage of Egyptian youth

today with a “sense of community” and, thus, with the potential to participate if directed to the right track.

Literature Review

Facing stratification and challenges to its identity, the modern day Middle East is attaching greater significance to concepts of citizenship and literature on the subject shows that many scholars seek a definition of citizenship in order to identify its impact on countries and on civil society.

The Definition of Citizenship and Nationality

In its broadest sense, citizenship is defined as being a member in a specific community (usually one that is political in nature, like a nation state) - a membership that gives its holders both rights of participation and responsibilities towards their communities. In many occasions, citizenship has been used to refer to working towards the improvement of communities to which a citizen belongs through involvement, participation and volunteer work. Although both have been used interchangeably, concepts of citizenship and nationality differ. While the latter is a legal status given to a person born in a particular country, the former includes the added implication of involvement. In their co-authored article, “Return of the Citizen: A Survey of Recent Work on Citizenship Theory”, Will Kymlicka, Professor of political philosophy at Queens University in Canada, and Wayne Norman, well known writer in the field of political philosophy, examine the concept of citizenship in reference to historical events. The authors, who explain that the concept of citizenship is misused to refer a lot of “nationality” issues, argue that citizenship involves more than merely being a citizen of a country. Instead, they suggest that citizenship is the basis on which people build their rights to ask for justice and to demand active participation within their societies. Similarly, Linda K. Kerber, Professor of Liberal Arts and Sciences, finds that that a new definition of citizenship, one that takes into consideration the global and national challenges to the concept, is needed.

Angus Stewart, senior lecturer of sociology at the London School of Economics and Political Science takes the concept of citizenship further by distinguishing between state and democratic citizenship. Defining state citizenship as the positive efforts exerted by the state or government towards the betterment of civil society, Stewart distinguishes democratic citizenship as the collective involvement of all members of civil society in order to improve conditions of their community. Stewart argues that societies should not depend exclusively on government contributions, but should seek to address problems through the actions of democratic citizenship, an arrangement that would create a wider sphere of improvement and clarify the important role citizens should play within their societies.

The Role of Youth

As previously mentioned, one issue closely interrelated with concepts of citizenship and nationality in the Middle East is youth civic engagement. Defined by Michael X. Delli Carpini, Dean of the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, as the “individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern”, civic engagement, particularly in relation to youth involvement, is seen by many as crucial for the improvement of conditions in the region. In a lecture given by Ragui Assaad, Professor and researcher at the H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs in the University of Minnesota, the debate about the growing numbers of youth in Egypt and its relationship with development was raised. Assaad, who explained that the growing “youth bulge” is a demographic phenomenon that can open great opportunities for Egypt and for the Middle East as a whole, elaborated that if the efforts and the potentials of youth is correctly channeled and used for the betterment of societies, many of the hard conditions Arab countries are facing could be improved. Furthermore, James Youniss, writer and researcher, and Susan Bales, founder and President of the non-profit Framework Institute, believe young people have an important role in stabilizing the world’s political order (upset by some political events like the Cold War and others). In their article “Youth Civic Engagement in the 21st Century” the authors discuss the great importance of youth engagement in the civil society with the turn of the century, stating that it is their role and their responsibility to use the opportunities created by the new conditions taking place in the world to help their countries develop and achieve better conditions and status.

In addition to the above theories, several surveys have also been conducted to measure the extent of youth civic engagement in the United States. Robert Grimm Jr., Professor of Philanthropic Studies and history in Indiana University, and Kimberly Spring, writer and researcher studied levels of civic engagement of American youth between the ages of 12 to 18 in order to assess the effect of their engagement upon civil societies. They found out that youth civil engagement is an important determinant in improving conditions of a certain problem issue within civil society, and argue that youth forms of civic engagement - like volunteerism and political participation have helped solve long existing problems within the civil society. Although the conclusions reached in their studies cannot be applicable in the case of Egypt or the Middle East because of the cultural specificity of the subject, their study, in demonstrating how youth civic engagement can cause real change within societies and provide creative solutions for problems, serves as a basis for building our research.

The Case of Egypt.

Faced with such problems as scarcity of resources, inequality, poverty, and slow economic growth, and with a demographic nature in which the youth are the majority, Egypt stands to benefit greatly from the involvement of its younger citizens. In order for this involvement to take place, however, an assessment of the true nature of citizenship and involvement must take place. This is particularly important in light of feminist scholar, activist, and author, Nawal el Sadaawi’s argument that youth are stratified along lines of religion and beliefs – a factor that hinders effective citizenship and involvement efforts.

In further researching the literature available on citizenship, it became clear that very little work has been done in this area within an Arab or a Middle Eastern context. Through the use of surveys, this paper attempts to contribute to the examination of citizenship from the perspective of Egyptian youth.

Methodology

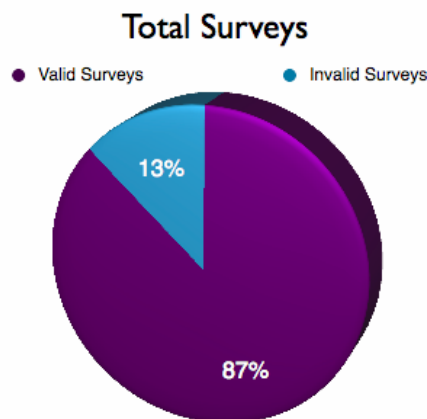
A survey with 30 questions of different formats was distributed amongst 100 students of the American University in Cairo, with the purpose of assessing their perspectives, as representatives of Egyptian youth, on the concept of citizenship and civic involvement.

The Chavis Scale:

Attached to the survey was a modified version of the "Chavis" Scale, a renowned psychological scale included in the research to provide a reliable and scientific way in assessing this social issue at hand which is not easily calculated. The scale is comprised of twelve questions that aim to measure the respondent's sense of community. Answers for the questions on this scale were calculated to present a percentage of the number of respondents with a strong sense of community and, thus, the potential to be active participants in the civil society.

In addition to the Chavis Scale, questions assessing volunteerism, active civic involvement and actual political participation were included in the survey to provide better insight of how youth perspectives on citizenship and civic involvement translate into action that is aimed at improving the Egyptian civil society.

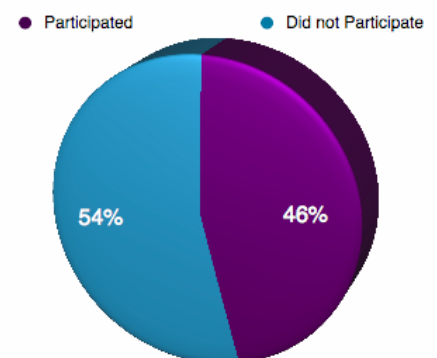
Calculations and Results:



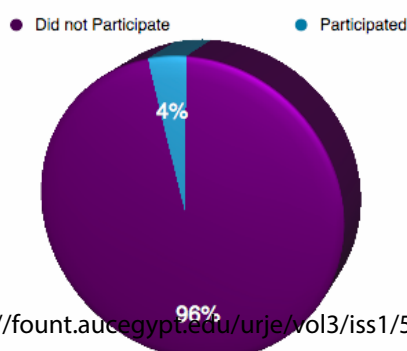
The results of the survey were split into four categories, the first of which (see pie chart, on the left) determined that 87% of the surveys were valid for use in our research and 13% were invalid for several reasons such as not completing all of the questions.

The second pie chart demonstrates that 54% of respondents had participated in civil society at some point, while 46% of respondents had not.

Actual Civic Engagement



Actual Political Participation



The third pie chart, representing the actual political participation, shows that 96% of those surveyed had not participated in any political events while only 4% had.

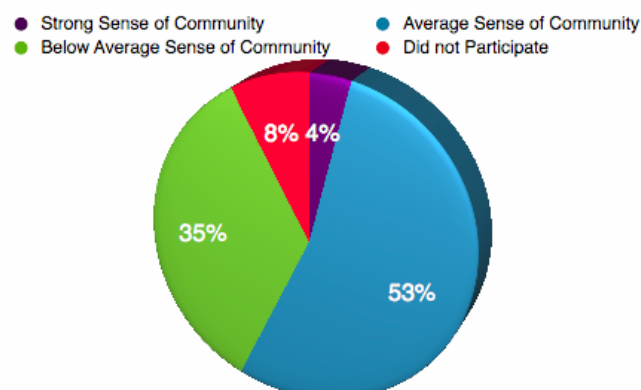
The forth and final pie chart represents the sense of community of youth and its strength. 53% had an average sense of community, 35% had a below average sense of community, 8% did not participate and 4% had a strong sense of community.

Discussion

A large amount of research has been conducted in the U.S. and Europe on youth civil involvement and their perspectives on the concept of citizenship; however, very little work has been done in reference to any Middle Eastern/Arab country. This unequal distribution of research intensifies the gap between the Middle East and the Western world. It also creates a knowledge gap in this particular area of study which is extremely important for Middle Eastern countries because of the special nature of their populations where the youth are the majority. Doing fieldwork to study the Egyptian youth perspectives thus helps in fulfilling the existing gap and helps provide a valid and working outline for a theoretical framework that could be created for Arab/ Middle Eastern countries depending on results deduced from this study.

The results of the survey conducted at the American University in Cairo indicate that youth seem to have very little affiliation to their country. Despite the opportunities presented by AUC, only 54% of the youth surveyed had participated in some form of community service. This may very well be the case because youth feel like they have no sense of belonging to their society and may lack the guidance needed in order to find purpose and direction.

**Actual Political Participation
The Chavis Scale**



<i>Did you present the results of the service project to others in the community? For example; Classmates, Community or both.</i>	<i>Yes: With Classmates</i>	<i>Yes: With Community</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Did not answer Question</i>
<i>Representation of respondents in Percentage:</i>	22.5%	12.2%	26.5%	38.8%

Table 1

One of the main problems identified through the survey relates to the dissemination of knowledge. Table 1 shows that, of the respondents who had participated in community service, only 34.7% had shared information regarding the experience in some way (either with classmates or the larger community), in opposition to the 26.5 % who said that they "Did not present results" and the 38.8% who refrained from answering this question. The low percentages of knowledge-sharing indicate a problem because sharing knowledge is a determinant factor of the success of service projects conducted in a certain community. It is through the sharing of knowledge regarding the experience of doing service to the community that other projects can be developed and needy areas in the community identified. Moreover,

sharing knowledge will help eliminate duplication of efforts (and duplication of mistakes) and will encourage innovation. The very low percentage of dissemination of knowledge among Egyptian youth is an important factor in the concept of civil participation that needs more attention.

<i>Are you proud to be an Egyptian?</i>	<i>Yes.</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Did not Answer.</i>
<i>Representation of respondents in Percentage:</i>	71.4%	16.3%	12.3%

Table 2

As shown in Table 2, 71.4% of the Egyptian youth surveyed in this project said that they are proud to be Egyptians, 16.3% said that they are not proud, and 12.3% did not answer the question. This is an important aspect in assessing the youth perspective on citizenship because pride in one's nationality is a motivation to actively participate in civil communities and, thus, promote development of the country. The high percentage of respondents' who indicated pride in their nationality can be taken as a positive window of opportunity to the Egyptian civil society as a whole because of the good likelihood of these translating into community service.

<i>Did you participate in the presidential elections held in 2005?</i>	<i>Yes.</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Did not Answer:</i>
<i>Representation of respondents in Percentage:</i>	4%	81.6%	14.4%

Table 3

<i>Are you a member of any political party?</i>	<i>Yes.</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Did not Answer.</i>
<i>Representation of respondents in Percentage:</i>	0%	91.8%	8.2%

Table 4

According to Table 3, when asked about their political participation 81.6% of respondents said that they did not participate in the 2005 presidential elections while only 4% did participate and 14.4% did not answer the question. This shows a huge gap in youth political participation - a very important factor in the overall sense of citizenship to individuals. By not participating in their country's political life, a major portion of the Egyptian society is not represented politically and are thus more likely to be frustrated or disappointed with overall conditions and may become further detached from their country and start considering immigration as a solution to their troubles.

Moreover, Table 4 shows the results acquired from asking about youth membership in political parties showed an even greater problem than the one discussed above: 0% of respondents said that they are members of any political party while 91.8 % said they were not affiliated with any party, and 8.2% did not answer the question. If the presidential elections are considered a recent change in the Egyptian political life that needs time for full integration into the society, the same cannot be assumed about political parties.

<i>Do you believe that youth can make a change?</i>	<i>Yes.</i>	<i>No.</i>
<i>Representation of respondents in Percentage:</i>	67.9%	32.1%

Table 5

As shown in Table 5, 67.9% of the respondents said that they do not believe that youth in Egypt can make a change, while 32.1% believed they can. These percentages can be associated with the very low percentage of political participation among youth because the same youth who do not believe that they can make a difference, are not likely to see any purpose behind political participation.

<i>Do you believe that only the government is responsible for improving conditions for Egyptians?</i>	<i>Yes.</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Did not Answer.</i>
<i>Representation of respondents in Percentage:</i>	38.7%	53%	8.3%

Table 6

Although the results shown in Table 5 may seem discouraging, the results in Table 6 show are more positive. When asked if they believe that only government is responsible for the betterment of conditions, 53% of the respondents said no, many of them assuring that the civil society has a crucial and an important role in improving conditions, while on the other hand, only 38.7 % of the respondents inclined towards putting all the responsibility on the government. These are encouraging results because they can be used as a starting point for cultivating the sense and the importance of involvement within youth, building on their belief that the civil society can lend a hand.

<i>Do you feel that democracy (the participation of all people in politics of the country) can be applied in Egyptian society?</i>	<i>Yes.</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Did not Answer.</i>
<i>Representation of respondents in Percentage:</i>	40.8%	48.8%	10.4%

Table 7

The answer to the question in Table 7 can also be linked to answers of the previous questions because the concept of democracy depends mainly on political participation. Only 40.8% of respondents believe that democracy is attainable, while 48.8% believe that it is not and 10.4% did not answer the

question. It is disturbing to see that less than 50% of the Egyptian youth believe that there is a chance for Egypt to make the move to democracy. Democracy plays an important role in giving citizens in a country a sense of involvement, and the fact that Egyptian youth do not believe in achieving this democracy shows an important aspect of how they perceive the concept of citizenship in relation to the reality they are living.

<i>Do you believe that your future dreams can be realized in Egypt?</i>	<i>Yes.</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Did not Answer.</i>
<i>Representation of respondents in Percentage:</i>	42.9%	44.9%	12.2%

Table 8

Finally, the results in Table 8 encompass several aspects discussed in details in previous questions. It was included in the survey to assess the overall satisfaction of Egyptian youth towards Egypt and whether they believe it is a place in which they can achieve their dreams. 42.9% responded positively to this question stating that they believe that Egypt can be the home for their future dreams. However, on the other hand, a higher percentage of 44.9% of the respondents replied negatively stating that Egypt cannot be a place where they can achieve their dreams.

The reasons of the dissatisfaction that is widely sensed among youth are clarified through the analysis of the questions throughout the survey. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that almost all problems detected by this research are not impossible to solve, and that they all share common, clear themes that can be solved through collective action of different institutions in the Egyptian society.

The Chavis Scale:

<i>Sense of Community:</i>	<i>Strong Sense of Community:</i>	<i>Average Sense of Community:</i>	<i>Below-Average Sense of Community:</i>	<i>Did not Participate:</i>
<i>Representation of respondents in Percentage:</i>	4%	53%	35%	8%

The analysis of the "Sense of Community Scale" shows that 35% of the youth have a below average sense of community demonstrating, once again, that youth lack a sense of belonging (probably due to their inability to act on or voice their thoughts, beliefs and ideas).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conducting the above research has revealed a number of problems that need to be addressed. Among these is the need to increase awareness among youth regarding the needs of the civil society and ways in which they can participate within it. In addition, the role of education in raising awareness amongst youth needs to be re-enforced.

Another problem that was revealed by doing this research was the missing voice of youth within the Egyptian society. Youth are not provided with the appropriate channels of communication and are not able to voice their ideas and their concerns towards their participation in the civil society. They are also not represented in accordance to their large number, but rather treated as any other faction in the Egyptian society.

Finally, the research revealed a huge knowledge gap in this particular area of study within the context of Egypt. The grave importance of this problem and the ones mentioned above prompt us to recommend the following:

1. Awareness campaigns must be carried out and directed towards youth themselves in order to inform them of the importance and the significance of their role in their civil. Moreover, awareness campaigns should be directed towards parents in order to inform them of the importance of endorsing values of citizenship and active participation in their. Finally, education should play a positive role in raising awareness through educating youth about concepts of citizenship and the importance of their participation as means to achieve growth and development in their country. This education should not only be theoretical, but should give youth and children the chance to experience this participation in school or university projects or “service learning projects”.

2. Proper channels of communication should be created in order to allow youth to voice their ideas, opinions, motivations and disappointments. This would increase the sense of belonging amongst them and drive them to participate in a civil society that respects their presence and admits their involvement. In addition, it is equally important to give youth fair representation in the civil society (according to their number) in order to enforce their role and to elevate their proactive sentiments.

3. Finally, regarding the problem of the existence of a knowledge gap in this particular area of study, we recommend increasing research efforts of scholars in this discipline. We also recommend that universities, institutions of higher education and other research institutions help, support and direct their students and scholars in conducting research that studies the youth psyche, assess the conditions needed to motivate the youth into participating in their civil society and create solutions to efficiently use youth efforts to maximize the benefits.

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